The Life of Philosophy and the Immortality of the Soul: An Introduction to Plato's Phaedo

David Bolotin
St. John's College
Santa Fe, New Mexico

12-11-87

It is widely acknowledged that Plato's dialogues are artistic wholes, in which the "content", or the speeches of the various characters, is inseparable from the "form", or the dramatic context within which these speeches occur. It is not so common, however, for readers to keep this feature of the dialogues consistently in view in their detailed interpretations. This neglect may be in part because of the figure of Socrates, who appears to be more than just a noble character in a drama, but also a spokesman for Plato's own thought. Yet even if Plato agreed with his Socrates in every conceivable respect, Socrates was notorious for his irony, and we cannot presume that he always spoke his mind in a straightforward manner. For example, his claim, at the end of the Meno, that virtue is true opinion rather than knowledge is not only uncharacteristic of him (contrast Republic 518d9-519a1 and Phaedo 69a6-b8), but it is based on a premise, namely that knowledge must be teachable, that he had explicitly rejected in his earlier identification of learning with recollection (contrast Meno 82a1-2 and 85d3-8 with 98d7-99c2; see, however, 100a1-7). Socrates' primary intention, it seems, on many or even most occasions, was to impart opinions that would be salutary for his particular interlocutors, rather than to teach them what he regarded as the truth (cf. Republic 382a1-d4). This does not mean that he was unconcerned to help others to learn the truth. But he thought, despite some appearances to the contrary, as Plato did, that it was unwise to try to communicate the most important truth to everyone who could

hear him, and furthermore that it was unnecessary, since those who could profit from this truth would be "capable of discovering [it] by themselves by means of slight indication (Seventh Letter 341d2-e3; contrast Apology of Socrates 19d1-7 and 33a1-b3, and also Euthyphro 3d6-9, with Phaedrus 275d4-276d5; see also Republic 450d10-e1). Accordingly, we cannot simply take what he says in the dialogues at face value as being a serious expression of his own thought, let alone Plato's.

If we accept all this, however, how are we to discover what Socrates did seriously think? How are we to avoid the dangers of arbitrary interpretation, such as that of regarding as genuine only those among Socrates' arguments that we happen to find congenial, while dismissing the others as Socratic irony? It seems to me that we can avoid such dangers, and that we can bring Socrates' innermost thought to light, but only if we approach the dialogue by beginning from the very surface of the text. This means that we must not presume to know in advance what Socrates could and could not have meant seriously; we must make a deliberate effort, if need be, to let the dialogue unfold for us as it did for the most docile of Socrates' interlocutors or listeners. To begin from the surface also means to pay close attention to the context in which the "philosophical" questions first arise, so that we may understand, and even feel, what is at stake in the discussion for the participants themselves, as well as their deep satisfaction when Socrates leads them to the positive conclusions they had hoped for, or their sharp

disappointment when he does not.1

This first stage of our reading, however, points beyond itself, for even in the case of those dialogues, like the Phaedo, whose arguments lead to an apparently satisfactory conclusion, difficulties will sooner or later begin to make themselves felt. Although we too, and perhaps more than we know, would like to believe what Socrates says most openly about virtue, the soul, and the like, these matters are too important, as the dialogues themselves keep reminding us, to allow us to remain content with Socrates' conclusions if we suspect that they are untrue. The wish to be certain of their truth will eventually lead us to a more critical examination of his arguments, which contain, in fact, all sorts of flaws. We may also notice contradictions among Socrates' conclusions, even within the same dialogue, and we will have to admit that we do not know which ones if any of them are true. Moreover, our concern for the matters in question may lead us to discover that at least some of Socrates' conclusions do not simply resolve, as they might have seemed to

1. Kenneth Dorter (Plato's "Phaedo": An Interpretation, Toronto, 1982) and Ronna Burger (The "Phaedo" A Platonic Labyrinth, New Haven 1984), whose emphasis on the dramatic aspect of the Phaedo is otherwise similar to my own, do not pay what I regard as sufficient attention to the surface of the dialogue. They presume, despite Socrates' claims to the contrary, that he does not share the "naive" concerns of his interlocutors, and they distinguish sharply between those Socratic remarks, or those readings of his remarks, that console his young companions and those that, in their view, he meant seriously (cf. Dorter, pp. 10, 43-44, 76-78, 159; Burger, pp. 13, 22, 50). But to do this, I believe, is to neglect the only starting point that can allow us to avoid arbitrariness in interpretation or to arrive at the center of Socrates' thought.

do at first, the human dilemmas that had prompted his interlocutors to want to accept them. It is at this stage in our experience of the dialogue that we are most on our own and in the greatest danger of becoming lost, but the dialogue can offer us guidance if we keep looking for it. Perhaps it is by reflecting on the contradictions or inconsistencies among Socrates' various statements that we can discover how to proceed. But often, anomalous expressions or seemingly casual remarks, whose significance we would never have appreciated unless we were genuinely perplexed by the arguments, will point us along the path of Socrates' deeper thinking.2 We can then reread the dialogue in a new light, and we can begin to see how Socrates has adapted his arguments to the character and the limitations of his particular interlocutors. And if we pursue this new path

2. "...it is required that the result of the investigation be not simply stated and put down in so many words...but that the reader's soul be constrained to search for the result and be set on the way on which it can find what it seeks. The first is done by awakening in the soul of the reader the awareness of its own state of ignorance, an awareness so clear that the soul cannot possibly wish to remain in that state. The second is done either by weaving a riddle out of contradictions, a riddle the only possible solution of which lies in the intended thought, and by often injecting, in a seemingly most strange and casual manner, one hint or another, which only he who is really and spontaneously engaged in searching notices and understands; or by covering the primary investigation with another one, but not as if that other one were a veil, but as if it were naturally grown skin: this other investigation hides from the inattentive reader, and only from him, the very thing which is meant to be observed or to be found, while the attentive reader's ability to perceive the intrinsic connection between the two investigations is sharpened and enhanced." (F. Schleiermacher, Platon's Werke, Introduction to the Republic, I, 1, pp. 15-16, as quoted in J. Klein, A Commentary on Plato's "Meno", North Carolina, 1965, pp. 7-8. The translation from the German is Klein's.)

3d edition, 1355-61,

adequately, not only will we see more coherence among the various parts of the dialogue (cf. Phaedrus 264b7-c5), but we will continue to find small yet cumulatively telling indications, like markers along a trail, that we are interpreting it as Plato intended. There is no necessity, of course, that we end up agreeing with the Socratic arguments and conclusions that we have brought to light. Perhaps we will reject them after further consideration. But at all events, our efforts will have helped us to reach an adequate understanding of what those arguments and conclusions are.

The method of interpretation that I have outlined here is not arbitrary. Indeed, it is the only one that allows for Socratic irony, as most scholars do not, without compelling us to make arbitrary decisions as to which among his assertions he meant seriously. On the other hand, the results of such an interpretation cannot reasonably persuade anyone who has not himself gone through a similar process of discovery to that of the interpreter. Accordingly, a commentator who reads Plato as I recommend cannot limit himself to giving an account of his own conclusions. He must try, instead, to show the way toward those conclusions by helping to engender in his readers something of his own experience of reading the dialogue. He must try to present its various levels in the order in which Plato meant for them to come to light, and also to show the necessity of that progression. Only then can he offer his conclusions.

In the following introduction to the Phaedo I have attempted

the kind of orderly presentation I have in view. I know that it may appear, at first, that I am merely restating the obvious. But I hope that the reader will understand my intention and give the benefit of the doubt to what may be an unfamiliar mode of exposition.

* * *

The conversation that is narrated in Plato's Phaedo is set in motion when Socrates' companion Cebes asks him why, when he came to prison, he began composing poetry, something he had never done before. A number of people had been asking Cebes this question, and understandably so, since Socrates was known to believe that poetry aims at giving pleasure, rather than teaching what is true and useful for human life, and that it is thus an enemy of philosophy and virtue (Republic 607a5-e2). Had Socrates' imprisonment, and the imminence of his death, led him to renounce the strictness of his dedication to philosophy? This question about philosophy and poetry also hints at one, which Cebes hesitates to ask directly, but which makes its presence felt throughout the Phaedo. As Callicles asks in the Gorgias, how is it wise to practice philosophy, since this pursuit makes a man unable to help himself, or to save himself or anyone else from the greatest dangers (Gorgias 486a4-d1; cf. Apology of Socrates 28b3-5)? Socrates' reply to this challenge had consistently been that a wise man does not fear death, but that he is more afraid of doing injustice (Gorgias 522e1-4; Apology of Socrates 29a4-b9). Yet however much they may have once been

persuaded by this response, Socrates' young companions are now afraid, and they cannot help but doubt whether a life that is indifferent to the dangers of persecution is truly wise or good. Socrates' recent turn to poetry, suggesting as it does that philosophy by itself has not been a sufficient source of strength to him in prison, serves to exacerbate this doubt. Now Socrates is sensitive to the boys' unspoken doubt, and so he concludes his account of why he began composing poetry with a remarkable claim. He says that anyone who has a worthy share in philosophy will be willing to die, and even eager to die as quickly as possible (61b7-c9). This is, of course, a paradoxical remark. Yet it is surely true, at all events, that if the philosopher is eager to die, the threat of death from persecution does not call into question the wisdom of the philosophic way of life.

In speaking as he does, however, about the philosopher's readiness to die, Socrates runs the risk of appearing to be a pessimist, or one who believes that our very existence is an evil. And even apart from the fact that a way of life that led to such a conclusion would be a dubious blessing indeed, for Socrates to invite his young companions to despair of existence would hardly be compatible with his claim to be a just man, and to be innocent of the charges of impiety and corruption of the young. Accordingly, he also reminds them that we are told that suicide is forbidden (61c9-10; cf. Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics 1138a3-14). Now Cebes, who has heard of the divine prohibition against suicide but who does not understand it, is even more

eager to hear a clear account of why suicide is said to be forbidden than of why the philosopher is willing to die (compare 61e5-6 with 61d4-5). In asking for a clear account, Cebes implies that there must be one, or that there must be good reason for any law or prohibition that is truly divine. Socrates replies that it will perhaps appear strange to Cebes if he should learn that despite the complexity of all other human affairs, it is never better for anyone to be dead than to be alive; and he adds that perhaps it appears strange to him already if those for whom it is better to be dead, or to die now rather than later, may not do themselves a favor without impiety, but must wait for another benefactor (62a2-7). This account of the prohibition against suicide causes Cebes to laugh gently in agreement, and Socrates himself admits that it could seem unreasonable when stated in this way. But when Cebes agrees that there are gods who care for us, and that we human beings are one of their possessions, Socrates is able to argue that the prohibition might not be unreasonable. For just as Cebes would be angry if one of his slaves were to kill himself, without a sign that Cebes wanted him to die, and would even punish him if he could, so might we be punished after death for trying to run away from our divine masters. And if this is true, Socrates continues, it is reasonable that one must not commit suicide until the god sends some necessity, such as the present one, to do so. By arguing in this way that philosophers, like everyone else, may have good reason to respect the divine prohibition against suicide,

Socrates shows himself as a supporter of piety or justice.

Cebes acknowledges the plausibility of Socrates' argument against suicide, but this very account makes it seem strange to him that the philosopher should be easily willing to die. If we humans are cared for by gods, who are, he assumes, the best of commanders, and whom he also assumes to take better care of us than we could do ourselves, isn't the philosophers' readiness to leave such masters inconsistent with their claim to be sensible or wise? Cebes' friend Simmias approves of Cebes' question, and he restates it in a more pointed way. He says that the question is directed personally against Socrates, for finding it so easy to abandon them, as well as to leave the gods who he had allegedly agreed were good rulers. In response to this challenge, Socrates says that both of the boys have spoken justly, and that they are presumably telling him he must give them a defense, as in a court of law. Now it might appear that only Simmias had called Socrates' justice into question, and that Cebes is merely wondering whether the philosophers' readiness to die is wise or well-advised. And indeed, it is Simmias, not Cebes, who replies emphatically that Socrates owes them a defense. Yet Cebes' questioning of the philosophers' wisdom also rested on the pious, and hence just (cf. Euthyphro 12d1-6), hypothesis that we humans are the possessions of gods who take good care of us; and it is to that extent a just question, even though it is not posed as an accusation and even though Cebes seems to direct his doubt not simply at the wisdom of the

philosophers' readiness to die, but also, on the other hand, at the hypothesis of divine care in the light of which the philosophers appear to be unwise.

Socrates' readiness, then, to accept his death, a readiness he spoke of in order to assuage his friends' unspoken doubts about the wisdom of the philosophic way of life, raises questions about how, and even whether, the philosopher acts justly towards gods and men; and at least on the assumption, which must be made on behalf of justice, that it is well-advised to be pious and just, Socrates' posture in the face of death raises questions about his wisdom as well. Indeed, Socrates himself raised these questions explicitly when he first explained why he had begun composing poetry. He told the boys that even before he came to prison, a recurrent dream had been saying to him, "Make music and work [at it]." Now at first he had thought of the dream as an encouragement to persevere in philosophizing, on the grounds that philosophy is the greatest music, or service to the Muses. But after his trial he thought it would be safer, in case the dream had been ordering him to work at the music of the populace, not to depart before purifying himself by composing poetry in obedience to the dream. In other words, Socrates' condemnation, and the imminence of his death, seem to have raised at least some doubt even in his own mind as to whether the philosophic way of life is sufficiently pious or just to be truly well-advised.

Socrates' doubts about philosophy, however, must not have gone very far, for he shows no sense of guilt, nor any serious

worry, about his nearly life-long disregard of vulgar music. And he is quite ready to defend the justice and the wisdom of his readiness, as a philosopher, to die. He tells Simmias and Cebes that his not being vexed by his death would indeed be unjust if he did not suppose that he would come to be with other gods who are both wise and good, as well as better human beings among the departed than those here. He admits that his hope to be with good men (andres) is not at all confident. But he would strongly affirm, he says, if indeed he would strongly affirm anything about such matters, that he will come upon gods who are good masters; and he is therefore, he says, not vexed in the same way, but rather of good hope that there is something for the departed, and something much better for the good than for the bad. Simmias does not seem troubled by Socrates' uncertainty as to whether he will be with the good men in the next life. Apparently, he does not regard Socrates' readiness to die as any the less sensible, or any the less just, on that account. To the contrary, he asks Socrates to share his thought with them. This thought, he says, seems to him to be a common good, and he adds that it would be Socrates' defense if he were to persuade them of what he is saying. The Theban Simmias is willing not to condemn Socrates, as unjust, for his readiness to abandon his friends in this world if he will share the secret of his apparent happiness with them now. In response, Socrates says that he wants to give them, his judges, an account of how it appears to him that a man who has really spent his life in philosophy has plausible reasons to be

confident in the face of death, and to be of good hope that he will gain very great goods there when he has ended his life.

We see, then, that Socrates' primary intention in the Phaedo is not to discuss the fate of the soul after death, but rather to persuade his friends that even despite the persecution of philosophers, the philosophic way of life remains the wisest and the best one. Yet he is led to speak about his hopes for an afterlife, for he wants to make his case without undermining his friends' confidence in the philosopher's justice. And he succeeds in this. The evidence of Socrates' success, moreover, is given an emphatic position in the very last words of the dialogue, where Phaedo says, on behalf of all those who were present, that Socrates was the best man they had ever known or tested, and that he was in particular the wisest or most sensible and the most just.

When we look more closely, however, at Socrates' defense of his readiness to die, we find that this very defense also raises new and troubling questions about philosophy as a way of life. To begin with, Socrates says that it may escape the others' notice that those who have a correct grasp on philosophy engage in nothing else, of their own initiative, than dying and being dead, and that if this is true, it would be strange for them to be vexed at the coming of what they had long been eager for and engaging in. Now Simmias, who is less tempted than Cebes by thoughts of suicide but more tempted than he admits by the attractions of a non-philosophic life, laughs at this seeming

caricature of the philosophers, even though he was not at all eager, as he claims, to do so. And he says that the many would think this was well said against the philosophers, and that the people of his native Thebes would very much agree that the philosophers really do want to die and, moreover, that they deserve to. Socrates, however, suggests that they should not be concerned with what the others say, and so he acknowledges to Simmias that those others speak truly, though he adds the qualification that they have not noticed how the true philosophers want to die, nor how they deserve death, nor what kind of death. This qualification is important, for without it Socrates would be simply agreeing with the philosophers' enemies that the philosophers deserve to die.

To clarify this last qualification, and thus to make his defense of himself more persuasive to Simmias, Socrates gains Simmias' agreement that death is the release of the soul from the body, and that to be dead is for the soul and the body each to be "itself in itself," having been released from the other. Simmias further agrees that the philosophic man despises the pleasures and adornments of the body; that his soul grasps the truth by reasoning, if at all, rather than through the deceptive senses; and that there is something "just (in) itself," and something beautiful and good, as there is bigness, health, and strength, and that the truth about these beings will be attained, if at all, by the man who frees himself as much as possible from the body, and who uses his "unalloyed mind, itself in itself" to try

to hunt "each of the beings unalloyed, itself in itself." On this basis, Socrates is able to argue that the philosophers will never acquire the wisdom that they say they love as long as they are alive and encumbered by the body. And from this it follows that "either it is nowhere possible to acquire knowledge, or else it is possible for those who have ended their lives" (66e4-6; cf. 68a7-b4). Socrates stresses, in other words, that the philosophers are not wise, but merely lovers of wisdom; and he suggests that this goal of their lives cannot be attained while they are alive, but only, if at all, after they die.

This argument, however, though it may help show why philosophers are ready to die, could also appear to weaken the case for philosophy as a way of life. The existence of a better future after death for the soul of the philosopher, a claim that Socrates first spoke of only to defend the justice and the wisdom of his readiness to die, now seems to be a necessity, quite apart from the threat of persecution, if the goal of philosophy is to be attainable at all. And yet even if the soul does continue to exist in the state of death -- and this is of course a large assumption -- how can the philosopher be confident that his soul will come to be wise, or in possession of the truth, after he dies? How can he even be confident that the rulers in Hades are not ill-disposed to philosophy, and that they will not place obstacles in the way of his soul's quest for wisdom or enlightenment? We recall, in this connection, that Socrates did not affirm with confidence that he himself expected to be among

the "good men" in Hades (63b9-c2; cf. 64b5-6). Yet to pursue a goal that is acknowledged to be unreachable during life, with only a mere hope that one's soul may attain it after death, seems to be a dubious choice, especially for those who claim to live their lives in accordance with reason (cf. 62d8-e4). The beginning of Socrates' argument, then, if it does not exacerbate the temptation for Simmias and Cebes to despair of the philosophic life, at least makes more articulate some of the deepest reasons for this temptation.

Socrates' defense, however, of the philosophers' readiness to die is not limited to the merely negative argument that they have no other hope for wisdom except in death. It also tries to show that they have good grounds for being hopeful. If the philosophers, Socrates suggests, associate as little as possible with the body during their lives, and keep pure from it until the god releases them, it is likely that they will then come to know all that is unalloyed, "and this is perhaps what is true" (67b1). Socrates later elaborates on this argument by contrasting the true virtues of those who have philosophized correctly with the so-called virtues of other men. Unlike the co-called courage, he says, that leads men to face death from a fear of still greater evils, or the so-called moderation that leads them to resist pleasures out of a desire for other pleasures, true virtue may not be a mere exchange of pleasures for pleasures, pains for pains, and fears for fears. Instead, wisdom alone may be the right currency for which all these things should be exchanged,

and when everything is bought and sold for the sake of wisdom, and with it, then there may be real courage, moderation, justice, and true virtue in general. True moderation, justice, and courage, he continues, may not be in the service of fears and pleasures and the like, but rather purifications from all such things, and wisdom itself may be a certain purification. Socrates concludes with the suggestion that those who have been purified and initiated will dwell with gods when they arrive in Hades, and with the claim that he believes the true Bacchants are those who have philosophized correctly. Now though he does not here use the word "deserve," Socrates clearly implies that the reason that the true philosophers will dwell with gods in Hades is that they "deserve" this kind of death (cf. 64b8-9), as a fitting reward for their having loved wisdom in the correct way, and for their noble superiority to security and pleasure. It is on the basis of desert that he can claim to have a reasonable or plausible expectation of finding good masters and companions in Hades, or masters and companions at least as good as those whom he has here. And with this claim Socrates concludes what he explicitly calls his "defense" of his readiness to die, a defense that is also, in fact, a defense of the reasonableness of the philosophic life itself.

Cebes breaks in at this point to say that although he believes the rest of Socrates' argument was finely or nobly spoken, what he has said about the soul causes much distrust among human beings, who fear that once it is released from the body it

is no longer anywhere, and is nothing. If the soul, he continues, were still to exist "itself in itself," after being released from "these evils," there would be much fine hope that Socrates' defense of his readiness to die, and his vindication of the philosophic way of life, was true. But Cebes says that perhaps there is a need for much encouragement and assurance that the soul of the dead man continues to exist and, moreover, that it has some power and wisdom. In response, Socrates suggests that they converse, or tell stories, about whether or not this is likely to be the case, and Cebes gladly agrees to this suggestion. Socrates then proceeds, after observing that not even a comic poet would say of him now that he is idly discussing inappropriate matters, to try to show that the souls of the departed exist in Hades. Although he had spoken of this conversation as a conversation through stories (70b6; cf. 61e2), and although these matters might seem to belong to the realm of faith rather than reason, he does give arguments to support his claims about the soul, and he even calls one of these arguments a demonstration (77c6, d4-5; cf. 88b5). Yet it makes sense that Socrates should give such arguments, especially since his aim is to vindicate the philosophic life. The philosopher is distinguished from other men, including those who also have deep convictions of the truth of their way, by his unwillingness to follow any path, or to accept any authority, that cannot be justified by reason; and he cannot reasonably make an exception in the case of his choice to follow the path of philosophy itself

(61c9-62c8 and Apology of Socrates 21b1-d7 and 23a8-c1; cf. 66b3-4).

Socrates' arguments in the Phaedo, however, fail to establish that the soul is immortal (cf. R. Hackforth, Plato's "Phaedo", Cambridge, 1955, pp. 64-65, 76, 84-86, 157, 163-66, 195-98; D. Gallop, Plato "Phaedo", Oxford, 1975, pp. 105-06, 134-36, 140-42; D. Keyt, "The Fallacies in Phaedo 102a-107b", Phronesis 1963, 167-72). It is true that Cebes is largely persuaded by the final one, but Simmias preserves his habitual skepticism about these matters, and Socrates not only approves of his distrust, but goes still further by specifying a major difficulty with the argument (107a2-b9; cf. 85b10-d4). He tells the boys that even the first things that have been presupposed, namely the beings "themselves in themselves" (100b5-9; cf. 76d7-e7), must be examined more clearly, however trustworthy they may seem. Now this very statement is indeed an encouragement to further inquiry, and Socrates has already exhorted his companions, as earnestly as he can, to persevere in the argument until they have defeated the contention that the soul is mortal (89b2-c4). Moreover, quite apart from anything that Socrates says, there is a powerful argument of sorts in his manner, which seemed so fearless and noble to the narrator Phaedo that he thought Socrates would fare well in Hades if anyone else ever had (58e3-59a1). And Socrates' bearing in the face of imminent death helps to strengthen all the more firmly Phaedo's belief in the superiority of the philosophic way of life (cf. 118a15-17). Yet

Socrates' exhortations, and even his example, cannot resolve the central difficulty that led him to try to prove the immortality of the soul. An exhortation, however earnest, to persevere in inquiry and a model, however inspiring, of fine behavior are not adequate substitutes for a reasoned vindication of the wisdom and the justice of the Socratic way of living and dying.

If, moreover, Socrates' companions should come to feel the weight of the fact that even his most persuasive argument for immortality is unsound, they might be threatened by an extreme version of the doubt about philosophy, one that could appear to be the deepest or most far-reaching of all doubts. Even earlier, in fact, there had been evidence of this doubt. After Simmias and Cebes had presented their strongest objections to Socrates' first arguments, all of those who were listening were brought to a painful state of mistrust, not only of those particular arguments, but of all future ones, for fear that they were unworthy judges of anything, or even that "the things themselves" were untrustworthy (88c1-7). Simmias' and Cebes' challenge to what they had regarded as extremely persuasive arguments led them to lose their trust that anything is stable and true, or at least that anything can be known to be true through reason. And when Phaedo, in the course of his narrative, mentions these feelings, which he and his companions had later made known to one another, Echecrates interrupts to say that he forgives their loss of trust, since the reported conversation also led him to wonder what argument they may still trust.

Now Socrates, even without having to be told, is quite sensitive to what his companions are feeling in response to Simmias' and Cebes' objections. He thus warns Phaedo, and himself, to be careful lest they become misologists, or haters of reason, and he does so on the grounds that one could suffer no greater evil than this. He explains to Phaedo that those who repeatedly come to reject arguments or statements that they had trusted as being true -- not, indeed, with an excessive trust, but without the art that has to do with arguments (compare 90b6-7 with 89d5) -- are often led to the belief that there is nothing sound or firm in arguments or even in things. And he suggests that it would be pitiable, if there were in fact some true, firm, and intelligible argument, if someone were to be deprived of the truth and the knowledge of the beings -- as he would be if, because of having been around arguments that seem true at one time but not at another, he were not to blame himself or his own artlessness, but ended up, because of his pain, gladly shifting the responsibility away from himself and upon arguments. From this we see that although Socrates does not simply condemn those who have succumbed to misology, he is still further from suggesting that their condition is forgivable, perhaps in part because he regards misology itself as an evil second to none, at least for a potential philosopher. Accordingly, he urges his companions, and himself, not to admit into their souls the thought that there may be nothing sound in arguments, but to think instead that they themselves are not yet healthy or sound,

and that they must be brave and exert themselves to become so. His exhortation to his companions, and to himself, to resist the temptation of misology supplements his exhortation for them to persevere in trying to prove the soul immortal. And we know that Phaedo, at least, was powerfully moved by Socrates' sensitivity and his encouragement (88e4-89a7). Yet the question remains, however: Is exhortation to persevere in inquiry an adequate substitute for the missing argument that would vindicate the life of philosophy?

There are also further difficulties with Socrates' attempted vindication of philosophy, difficulties that would remain even if the soul could be shown to be immortal. Socrates claims not merely that the soul exists in Hades, but that the souls of the good will fare better there than those of the bad (63c5-7; cf. 72e1-2), and it is at least partly on the basis of this latter premise that he justifies the philosopher's confidence that his soul will attain wisdom after death (cf. also 80d5-81a10). Now although this premise may satisfy our sense of justice, Socrates never argues for it. Perhaps, however, it should be relied on, in the absence of any evidence to the contrary, as the most appropriate and hence the most plausible supposition regarding Hades. Yet precisely if this is so, precisely if the souls of the good are rewarded in Hades, we must wonder about the philosopher's confidence regarding his own future. Socrates' strongest argument in support of this confidence was that the philosopher is concerned with true virtue or purification, and

that he can therefore depart from life in such a pure state that he will arrive in Hades as an initiate, and as one who will dwell with gods. Socrates had explained that the highest virtue, and the foundation of all true virtue, is wisdom: it is wisdom, and the other virtues that exist only together with wisdom, that are said to be purifications. Now let us grant that wisdom, and wisdom in the sense of purification from the body, is indeed the foundation of all true virtue. But wisdom is just what the philosopher, insofar as he is still a philosopher or a lover of wisdom, has presumably not acquired. Moveover, according to Socrates' own argument, the philosopher cannot acquire wisdom as long as he is still alive and encumbered by the body. Yet now it appears that the philosopher's confidence that he will fare well in Hades presupposes that he has already acquired it, and that he has already become pure. It presupposes, in other words, that he has already attained that good whose presumed unattainability, during his lifetime, required him to direct his hopes for it towards Hades. Now Socrates does suggest, on several occasions, that to have tried as hard as possible to become wise or pure might be an acceptable substitute, in the gods' eyes, for having succeeded (69d2-6; cf. 67a3; c9; 80e2-81a10). But this suggestion is at odds with his strictest claims, and we are left wondering what grounds, if any, the philosopher has for a reasonable confidence in the face of death.

Later in the dialogue, Socrates does suggest an alternative view of the kind of purity of life that would justify the

philosopher in being confident of a good reception in Hades. According to this picture, which Socrates develops at some length, the philosopher need not have attained the complete purity that is wisdom. He must, however, be a lover of learning, and he must hearken dutifully to Philosophy when she urges his soul to trust in nothing but what it, "itself in itself," observes "itself in itself among [or of] the beings" and to regard nothing that is sensible, and in particular not the visible, as being true (82b10-c1; 83a1-b4). The soul of the true philosopher will suppose that it ought not to resist this liberation by Philosophy, and so it will abstain as much as possible from pleasures, desires, pains, and fears; it will reckon that excessive pleasure and pain compel everyone's soul to suffer the greatest and ultimate of evils, namely to regard that in reference to which it feels these feelings -- and this is, above all, the visible -- as being clearest and truest, which it is not (83b5-c8; contrast, however, 89d2-3). Now it is true that this account of the philosopher's duty requires him only to trust, and not to possess knowledge, that the true beings are the intelligible beings "themselves in themselves." And yet the demand, for instance, to regard nothing visible as true seems no less difficult for a human being to meet than the demand for such knowledge or wisdom. Moreover, as Socrates continues to spell out for Cebes what is involved in this new interpretation of the philosopher's duty, it comes to light as even more obviously unfulfillable than the former one. In that former account,

Socrates had suggested that the wise man is indifferent to the presence or absence of pleasure and pain (69b4-5). But now he says that "each pleasure and pain" -- and not merely those that are excessive -- nails the soul to the body, making it bodily itself, so as to believe that whatever the body says is true. And yet if, as this implies, all pleasure and pain is necessarily at odds with the duty of the philosopher, no human being can possibly fulfill that duty. Socrates supposes, moreover, that from agreeing with the body and rejoicing in the same things, the soul is compelled to become so similar to it, in its manner and its rearing, that it will never reach Hades in purity, or have a share in the divine and pure and uniform company. And so we are again led to doubt, or this time even to despair, that the philosopher can have any plausible grounds for expecting to attain wisdom after he dies.

Still later in the dialogue, however, Socrates again reinterprets the philosopher's task, and this time in such a way as to allow us to be hopeful that it can be fulfilled. For his last exhortation, which is placed emphatically just before his final argument on behalf of immortality, demands neither the purity of wisdom nor such complete avoidance of pleasure and pain as to permit the belief that the senses perceive nothing true. Rather, as we have noted already, Socrates urges his companions to keep their argument alive, and to be brave and zealous in their efforts towards the health or soundness that would free them from the temptation of misology (contrast 89b4-c4 and 90d9-

e3 with 83a8-b4 and d4-e3). Now despite the difficulties in meeting these demands, it is plausible, at any rate, that we humans are able to do so (cf. Meno 86b6-c2). And so Socrates finally leaves his companions, and us ourselves, with at least some grounds for hope that the philosopher can deserve the reward of wisdom in Hades.

This interpretation of the philosopher's duty would appear, moreover, to be the one that Socrates himself truly believes in. His whole life, as we know of it from Plato's dialogues, seems to bear witness to the depth of his commitment to this duty of keeping reason alive. And his manifest calmness in the face of death makes sense as the posture of one who knows that he has fulfilled what was asked of him during his lifetime. There is, however, a difficulty with this last suggestion. For in exhorting himself, along with his companions, to resist the temptation of misology, Socrates adds that he is afraid he is not now in a philosophical condition, but rather in love with victory, like those who are completely uneducated. He says that he differs from those others only in that he will be eager to persuade himself, rather than his interlocutors, of the truth of what he says. Now since Socrates speaks here of his future attitude, it could appear, surprisingly, that he expects to fail in his efforts to recover his philosophic frame of mind. But what he says next is far more surprising even than this. For he proceeds to argue that it is reasonable for him, under the circumstances, to maintain his unphilosophic stance, and he

strongly suggests that he does not intend to give it up. In other words, Socrates seems to disregard the duty to be, or even to try to be, philosophic. And he does so on the day of his death, when it would seem that he should be most in need of the consolation of knowing that he has devoted his whole life to philosophy.

Addressing Phaedo as a "dear friend" (91b1), Socrates explains to him his reasoning in support of his unphilosophic stance, and he asks him to observe how selfish it is. If the soul, he says, is truly immortal, as he says he is eager to believe, it is a fine thing indeed to be so persuaded. And if, he adds, there is nothing for the one who has died, at all events during the time before his death he will be less unpleasant to those around him with lamentation; and his folly, that is to say, his belief in immortality, will not continue to exist with him -- which would indeed be an evil -- but will soon perish. Now we observe that this argument is even more selfish than Socrates openly admits. For granting that he is concerned to spare his friends from the unpleasantness of his lamenting, he would also of course like to avoid this pain himself. And his concern for his companions' immediate feelings must be weighed against his willingness to expose them to what would apparently be, for them, the evil of a lasting error about the fate of the soul. He does warn them, to be sure, not to trust his argument, or even his motives, and to resist whatever does not seem true to them. But the fact remains that his avowed wish to hold a comforting

belief, even though it may be false, makes sense, by his own account, only in terms of his own interests as distinct from theirs. Not only, then, does Socrates' argument place self-interest ahead of any duty to try to be philosophic, but it also implies that it is reasonable to pursue one's own interest even at the expense of one's friends'.

Now Socrates' claim that an unphilosophic selfishness will prompt him to argue for the immortality of the soul is surely playful and ironic. But his statements in apparent disregard of the philosopher's duty cannot be simply dismissed. Admittedly, it may seem incredible that Socrates, at the approach of death, should renounce the solace of trusting that his whole life will have been dutiful, and true to philosophy. But we must wonder about the strength of such solace, for in the light of Socrates' various suggestions regarding what the philosopher's duty truly is, it remains uncertain whether even the most dedicated lover of wisdom can be reasonably confident that he has fulfilled his duty. Moreover, the dialogue contains still further evidence that leads us to raise questions about Socrates' belief in such a duty. Socrates has already implied, in his discussion of the law against suicide, that no rule of action can be truly obligatory unless it is reasonable, and this means, in part at least, unless it is good for the one obliged (61c9-62c8). Indeed, our very seriousness about justice or duty requires us to claim that acting from duty is always in the agent's own interest, at least in the highest or truest sense of the word; otherwise, what is

said to be a duty could not be truly binding (cf. Republic 357a1-368c3; Laws 662c5-663c5). And in keeping with this thought, Socrates' defense of the justice of his readiness to die includes the argument that the philosopher's posture toward death is in conformity with a reasonable, or at least a plausible, calculation of his own advantage (cf. 62c9-63b2; 63e8-64a2). But Socrates seems not to have believed that obedience to a rule to philosophize, or to try to philosophize as much as possible, is advantageous for anyone, even for himself, in every circumstance that might arise. Indeed, he has suggested, rather, that the only definite claim about what is better and worse that suffers no exception is the claim that it is never better for a human being to be dead than to be alive (62a2-5). And even this claim does not imply, according to him, that it is better for everyone, and in all circumstances, not to commit suicide: the god may send some necessity that requires this (62c2-5; and cf. 62c8 and 98e3-5). How, then, could Socrates regard either the activity of philosophy, or the endeavor to philosophize as much as possible, as being the better alternative for anyone in all conceivable circumstances? And at least if he did not do so, how could he have believed that there is a duty to philosophize, or even to try to philosophize as much as possible?

The hypothesis that Socrates did not regard philosophy as a duty could help us to explain, moreover, his willingness to compose poetry while he was in prison awaiting death. His own claim, we recall, is that he thought it was safer to purify

himself before he died, just in case his recurrent dream, which ordered him to make music, meant that he should compose vulgar music rather than continue to philosophize. But this belated, and calculating, change of ways seems almost frivolous as a response to pious fear. Might he not have been seeking, rather, to ease the pain of his imprisonment by making this rare concession to human weakness? Might he not have chosen, instead of even trying to spend all his time philosophizing, to content himself with a lesser, but apparently more attainable, good? Indeed, the entire discussion that is narrated in the Phaedo might be a similar concession on Socrates' part to his circumstances. This conversation, or story-telling, about immortality might not really be philosophizing so much as it is Socrates' way of passing the day of his death, in the company of his young friends, as pleasantly as possible (cf. 61d10-e4; 70b5-c3; and consider 99d6 ff.).

The suggestion that Socrates may have rejected the notion of philosophy as a duty, though it helps us to interpret some of his actions, and some of his statements in the Phaedo, leaves us wondering whether he had adequate grounds for such a rejection. If he rejected it in the belief that the effort to philosophize is not always well-advised, did he have adequate grounds for this belief? In fact, however, I do not think that this latter claim is the true basis for his rejection of a duty to philosophize. Let me suggest instead, as a hypothesis, that he had doubts not only about the notion of philosophy as a duty, but about duty altogether. For the awareness that what is called obligation must be good for the one obliged if it is to be truly binding, combined with the experience that strict obedience to

any law is not sufficiently rewarding in itself, without the prospect of further rewards, may lead one to see that duty itself cannot be our most important concern. Or to state this in more Platonic language, the highest idea is the idea of the good, and not the idea of justice or duty (cf. Republic 504c9-505d10). But can one still ~~bow to~~ acknowledge the claims of duty, at least as they present themselves, without believing that these are our most important concerns? Socrates may not have thought so. At all events, the hypothesis that he did not would help account for his apparent belief that there are no universal rules to guide our action, not even the rule that one ought to try in all circumstances to philosophize.

Yet even if there were no duty, in the strict sense, to try to philosophize, Socrates' suggestion that such efforts are not always well-advised, and his apparent willingness to relax in these efforts during the time before his death, would remain of questionable wisdom. Indeed, his own assertions about the immortality of the soul lead us to wonder whether his final posture toward philosophy was sensible. For if there are gods who have firm wishes for us, and who have great power to harm or help us after death, would it not always be better for us to try to do what they want us to, and to ask, perhaps, for their indulgence if we should fail? And if, in particular, the god at Delphi has ordered Socrates to spend his whole life philosophizing, and if Socrates' soul is immortal, how can it be better for him to neglect these orders during the days and hours

before his death (cf. Apology of Socrates 23b4-c1; 28e4-29b7)? Socrates seems to have believed that he had not been given any such firm and enforceable orders. But how could he, or how could anyone, claim to know this? Did he simply gamble that there were none?

There is at least one condition, however, under which Socrates' anomalous behavior in prison might not be so unreasonable, namely, if he had good reason to reject the entire notion of personal immortality. For in that case, he would obviously not have to fear punishment or persecution after death. Now admittedly, the suggestion that Socrates might not have believed in personal immortality is paradoxical, and it contradicts his own repeated claims that he does believe in it. On the other hand, we may recall that Socrates' initial claim was merely hypothetical. If, he said, he would strongly affirm anything about such matters, he would strongly affirm that he was going to come upon gods who are good masters (63c2-4; cf. Meno 86b1-c2). But this statement leaves open the possibility that he in fact made no strong affirmations at all about such matters. Moreover, Socrates' final argument for immortality concludes no more than that "the god, and the form itself of life, and anything else that may be deathless" will never perish (106d5-8). This emphatic culmination of the arguments for immortality does not claim that the soul of the individual human being is immortal. And given the difficulties in trying to make sense of Socrates' behavior, on the assumption that he did believe in

personal immortality, one may have to consider the possibility that he did not.

Even, however, on the assumption that Socrates did not believe in personal immortality, it would not yet follow that he had adequate reasons for turning to poetry and the like while in prison. His not believing in personal immortality would not make his behavior in prison more rational or wise unless he had a sound basis for not believing in it. But perhaps he thought that he had, in fact, discovered such a basis. This is not to say that he thought he had proved there is no personal immortality. His acknowledged ignorance regarding the causes of perishable beings would rule out the possibility, on his part, at least, for such a proof (cf. 96a6-c2; 97b3-7). But if, however, the belief in personal immortality could be seen to depend on certain other beliefs that he had good reason to reject, then he could still have had strong reasons for rejecting this belief as well. Now in order to help explain this suggestion more clearly, let me first consider the following feature of the dialogue. Immediately after Socrates presents that account of the philosopher's duty which is most obviously unfulfillable, Simmias and Cebes respond with the most forceful of their objections against his claim that the soul is immortal. Cebes, moreover, instead of continuing, as Simmias does, to ask for help in responding to the doubts and fears of others, now for the first time speaks approvingly of the argument against immortality, and he comes close to saying that it is foolish to be confident in

the face of death (contrast 87d3-7 and 88b3-8 with 69e7-70b4, 77d5-e7, and 86d1-4). Now it is not immediately clear why Cebes should feel most acutely distrustful of the belief in immortality precisely at this stage of the argument. But a reason does suggest itself. For no one who is serious, as Cebes is, about the philosophic way of life can fail to sense, if only vaguely, that Socrates has portrayed it as demanding the impossible. But the very notion of duty, or justice, presupposes that its demands are not impossible. So if what is called the philosopher's duty is in fact impossible to fulfill, then it can not be taken seriously as a duty, and its so-called demands are not true demands. Now Cebes had already been persuaded that the only true duty, or true justice, is that which the philosopher either practices or strives to practice (cf. 69a6-e7). Accordingly, Socrates' extreme interpretation of that duty must tend to undermine his belief in duty altogether, and this may well explain why he becomes so distrustful about the immortality of the soul. For just as the belief that one will fare well in Hades seems to depend on the belief that one deserves to, so the belief in personal immortality itself seems to depend on the belief that everlasting being, and even well-being, can be deserved. It seems to presuppose, in other words, the belief in duty as a sign that man's truest nature is higher than the mortal or merely human. This suggestion about the conditions for our believing in personal immortality could also help to explain why Socrates does not even attempt his final argument for immortality

until he has again reinterpreted for Cebes the philosopher's task. For it is here that Socrates speaks of that task as the effort to resist, and overcome, the temptation of misology -- as a task, in other words, that Cebes can plausibly hope to fulfill, and which he can thus take seriously as a genuine duty. And Cebes' renewed belief in the philosopher's duty may well explain, more than anything else does, why he finds Socrates' final argument for immortality to be convincing. Indeed, not only does Cebes' belief in the philosopher's duty help make him able to believe that his soul is immortal, but it also makes him need to believe so. For it is only after death, it seems, that he could acquire the wisdom without which the duty to philosophize would appear to be in vain. Now to return to our original question, if Socrates thought that a naive belief in duty, and in duty as the supreme good, is among the roots and conditions of the trust in personal immortality, this could help to explain why he himself might not have shared that trust. For if, as we suggested earlier, he thought that considerations of duty cannot be our most important concerns, he might well also have thought that the belief in personal immortality is untenable. And if the first of these conclusions is a reasonable one, so also, it would seem, is the second. Now to be sure, this entire argument is a tentative one. But it does provide a basis for understanding how Socrates could reasonably have allowed himself some neglect, during his imprisonment, of his life-long practice of philosophy (cf. Christopher Bruell, "Strauss on Xenophon's Socrates," The

Political Science Reviewer, Vol. XIV, Fall, 1984, pp. 288, 291-292).

When we recall, however, Socrates' reasons for encouraging his companions to believe that their souls are immortal, it seems that a denial of individual immortality would be fatal to any attempted vindication of the philosophic life. For if we do not even exist as individuals after death, we surely cannot attain wisdom then, and so it would appear, by Socrates' own argument, that the philosopher's quest for wisdom is the pursuit of an unreachable and even chimerical goal. Now admittedly, if wisdom, as the dialogue sometimes suggests, means pure knowledge, untainted by the senses, of the beings "themselves in themselves," it does appear to be unattainable. But the dialogue also suggests, if only quietly, that the truth about the beings might not be entirely distinct from knowledge concerning their embodiments in the sensible world (see especially 67b1; and compare Philebus 15b1-c3). And if this is so, then wisdom, or human wisdom, would mean instead the greatest possible knowledge of the beings as they are given to us through perception. And such wisdom, or progress in such wisdom, is indeed attainable during our lives. If, then, Socrates denied that there is individual immortality, this would not necessarily be a denial that philosophers can become wise.

If, of course, Socrates did not believe in individual immortality, his not being vexed in the way that most people are at the imminence of death could not, as he claims, stem from

hopefulness that his soul would finally attain wisdom when he died. It seems, rather, that he might have been heavily influenced by the knowledge that his only alternative to dying now was to die later, after suffering the evils of a more prolonged, and an impoverished, old age (Crito 43b10-c3; cf. 53d7-e2; Apology of Socrates 38c1-7; Republic 328d7-329e5; and compare Apology of Socrates 31c4-32a3 with 40a2-c3). This suggestion, however, does raise a new difficulty. For Socrates had told his companions that unless he supposed he would come upon wise and good gods, and better men among the departed than those here, his not being vexed at death would be unjust. If he did not believe in personal immortality, must we conclude that he was, in fact, unjust? In Socrates' defense, however, we recall that he told his companions he regarded it as more just, as well as better and nobler, to submit to the city's punishment rather than to run away from prison (98e2-99a4). And even Crito, who had urged his flight from prison by appealing, among other things, to justice, had come to acknowledge that Socrates' decision to remain, and to drink the hemlock, was the just or right one (compare Crito 45c5-d8 with 51c5, 52d7, and 54d8). It is true that Socrates' willingness to submit to the city's punishment implied a willingness to leave his friends. But it may well have helped even them more than it hurt them. For it contributed greatly to Socrates' posthumous reputation, even among the many who were suspicious of all philosophers, as a just and law-abiding man; and it thus helped to protect his friends,

and all the friends of philosophy, from further persecution. Whether or not, then, Socrates believed in personal immortality, he cannot be faulted, it seems, for his willingness to die, but merely, if at all, for the ease with which he did so. And we also note, on Socrates' behalf, that the ease with which he met his death seems not to have harmed his companions, but even to have been a consolation or a source of strength to them (cf. 58e1-59a7).

A similar consideration, moreover, allows us to defend Socrates against the further charge that he may have deceived his friends by claiming to believe in the immortality of the individual soul. For even if this claim was indeed a lie, his argument was not heedless of his friends' interests, including their long-term ones. Even if the individual soul is not immortal, it might still be better for them -- especially during the difficult period that surrounds Socrates' death, but not only then -- to believe that it is (107c1-d5; compare 61d3-62c9 with Republic 382c3-d3). And in a society where impiety is regarded as a capital crime, and where philosophers as such are suspected of being atheists (cf. Apology of Socrates 23d2-7), it is surely of great benefit to the friends of philosophy that Socrates acquire the posthumous reputation of having been not only extraordinarily just, but also more or less orthodox in his piety.

If Socrates did not believe, however, in personal immortality, he would presumably have wanted to share his thought

with those among his companions who could profit from it. Yet merely to share his opinion is not yet to share his thought. And there may be no better way of helping his friends to think as he did, even on the assumption that he did not believe that his soul was immortal, than the one he actually pursues. By encouraging their desire for an argument that would show the immortality of the soul, Socrates sharpens, at least temporarily, their awareness of their own ignorance regarding this most far-reaching of questions; and he may thereby help awaken, in one or more of them, a desire for knowledge of the whole. Furthermore, his companions are incapable of the truest learning until they are first weaned from their reliance on his opinions (91b8-c5; cf. 70b8-9; 76b8-12; 78a1-9; 89c5-11; 108d4-e3). His arguments on behalf of immortality, by their clear enough weaknesses and even their falsity, may compel some of the boys, as they think back upon them after his death, to become more independent. And finally, the belief in the separateness and immortality of the soul is so deeply rooted in them, and in their fundamental beliefs about philosophy, that they could never genuinely overcome it without first thoroughly reexamining what philosophy is (cf. 69e6-70b1; 76d7-e7). Socrates' indications of the various obstacles, even and precisely if there is individual immortality, to seeing the philosophic life as a reasonable one may help, more than anything else could, to guide some of them toward the necessary rethinking.

If, moreover, Socrates' conversation were to help free some

of his companions from their attachment to the belief in individual immortality, it might also help them to overcome the temptation of misology. For the boys are obviously troubled by the lack, or at least the lack of clarity, of any direct evidence for immortality; and they have thus been led to try to strengthen the case for it through arguments, arguments which themselves are necessarily weak. And when Simmias and Cebes give their most persuasive arguments against an immortal soul, the response of Phaedo and the others is to become discouraged, and to lose their trust in reason altogether. Instead of appreciating the evident strength in these arguments, and the weaknesses in those with which Socrates had persuaded them of immortality, they doubt whether they can ever again trust their own judgment, or any argument, or even the things themselves (88c1-d3). So powerful, in other words, is their attachment to the belief in immortality that they would sooner believe that there is no truth in speeches or arguments than that there is no argument for the immortality of the soul. Moreover, they would sooner believe that there is no stability or truth in the things themselves than believe that the soul is mortal (compare 88c6-7 and 90c1-6 with 90d6-7). For among other things, by not believing in truth, they could hold on to the belief in immortality, if not as <u>the</u> truth, at least as their own "truth," and as no less true than any other belief. It may well be, in fact, that no instance of the despair of reason, or of the so-called despair of truth, would either originate or persist without the attachment to something more or less akin to

the belief in personal immortality. At all events, it is their continuing attachment to the belief in such immortality that leads Socrates' companions to be tempted by this despair. Now it is true, indeed, that their belief in personal immortality also gives them hope, and thus helps them to resist the temptation to despair of reason and truth (66e4-6; 67e6-68b4; cf. 107c1-d5). But for them to overcome this temptation, it may well be necessary that they free themselves from that belief, by thinking through its difficulties and especially by examining the other opinions that help engender it.

The argument that I have suggested here makes sense, I believe, of Socrates' readiness to die, as well as his other deviations, while in prison, from the pursuit of wisdom. Moreover, although this account may appear to deny that wisdom is attainable, and thus to invite despair about the philosophic life itself, it in fact points the way towards overcoming this temptation to despair of the pursuit of truth. Yet to argue that our reason can disclose what is true, and that progress in wisdom is possible for us, is not yet an adequate argument that Socrates was correct in regarding philosophy, despite the threat of persecution, as the greatest good for a human being (cf. Apology of Socrates 38a1-5). It is beyond my capacity, however, to provide such an argument, in part because this truth, if it is a truth, can only be learned by each of us on his own, and through his own experience. Yet it does seem to me that it is in and through the activity of philosophizing that we can be most

adequately reconciled -- as we can not help but want to be -- to the awareness of our own mortality. In ~~this~~ his activity of thinking the philosopher accepts, but does not simply yield to, the sadness that accompanies this awareness. And it is above all, it seems to me, because philosophy thus incorporates an acceptance of the necessity of death that Socrates characterizes it as the practice of dying and being dead.